



In Touch South India

Headlines from the U.S. Consulate General Chennai



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<http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>

Earth Day 2009

Pulicat Lake, 60 kilometers north of Chennai, is more than a source of sustenance for thousands of fisher folk; it is part of a planetary system of wetlands on which countless species of flora and fauna, including Homo sapiens, depend. This single brackish lagoon, covering an area of about 350 square kilometers and with an average depth of less than a meter, is home to over one hundred species of fish, an essential stopover for many varieties of migratory birds, including the magnificent greater flamingos, a nursery for endangered green sea turtles, and a habitat for aquatic vegetation ranging from evergreen forest to phytoplankton. Fishing villages bordering the lagoon survive on an annual harvest of white and tiger prawns, mullets and green crabs. Salt is also produced from the lagoon.

On the eve of Earth Day 2009, Dr. Beth Middleton, a research ecologist from the National Wetlands Research Center in Louisiana, explored Pulicat Lake together with a group of local fishermen. There she saw firsthand both the enduring threats to that delicate ecosystem and the proven achievements of scientists, economists, educators and villagers working in partnership to restore the lagoon and manage its resources for the benefit of all. In her Earth Day lecture on “Climate Change and the Future of Wetlands” at the C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre, Chennai, on April 22 (Earth Day), Dr. Middleton called for urgent action and international cooperation to protect the rapidly shrinking wetland ecosystems

of the world. She noted that wetlands not only supply water, but filter out impurities, reduce flooding and erosion and add to the nutrient cycle. Because wetlands vegetation stores carbon instead of releasing it into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, wetlands slow the onset of global warming. Ultimately, saving the wetlands and environmental protection in general depend on education. “People need to rebuild their relationship with nature,” Dr. Middleton said.



Dr. Beth Middleton, facing camera, boards a boat with local fishermen at Pulicat Lake.

The health of Pulicat Lake and of all wetlands is emblematic of the many serious environmental threats to our planet. President Obama in his Earth Day proclamation noted “the strong ecological interdependence among nations” and the need for a unified approach to deal with “alarming shifts in the natural world, including thawing permafrost, melting glaciers and rising sea levels.” He proposes to spend \$579 million in the Fiscal Year 2010 International Affairs Budget to promote globally the adoption of clean energy technology,

help countries adapt to climate change and encourage sustainable land and water management around the world.

We must rise to the task for our stewardship of the planet will define this century and will affect the quality of life for generations to come. A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt, a great conservationist, called on Americans to “leave this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us.” It is high time that all of us live up to that challenge.

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Other Links:
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Consulate Phone Number:
044-2857-4000

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044-2811-2020



In a statement following the Indian parliamentary elections, President Obama called the voting a testament to the strength of India’s democracy upholding “values of freedom and pluralism that make India an example for us all.” It is not hyperbole but simple fact that those of us fortunate to have been in India in April and May witnessed the largest democratic exercise the world has ever seen. That it went so smoothly is a credit to India and its people. It also reminds us how blessed we are – Indians and Americans – to live in countries where all voices are heard and where the people choose who will govern them. Of course, elections are not an end in themselves but the beginning of an enormous undertaking. In a telephone call congratulating Prime Minister Singh on being sworn in for a second term, President Obama pledged to work together with India to address global challenges, such as the economic downturn, climate change and counterterrorism. He also invited the Prime Minister to Washington.

- Andrew T. Simkin, Consul General

The First 100 Days

Ever since the frenetic first 100 days of the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, American presidents have been judged against the 100-day benchmark. Rather than complain about the arbitrariness of that conveniently round figure, President Obama decided to embrace it both to take stock of his administration and to map the way forward. Most important, in the spirit of former Mayor of New York City Ed Koch who customarily asked people he met on the streets, “How’m I doing?” President Obama asked people around the world not only to judge him good or bad but to offer ideas.

In Chennai on April 18, we called together 50 “opinion-makers,” e.g., academicians, politicians, religious leaders, heads of nongovernmental organizations, business leaders, etc., divided them into five different focus groups, and listened to their views on the Obama Administration and on how the Consulate General can increase mutual understanding between India and the United States. The verdict on President Obama was overwhelmingly positive, with participants most often citing his willingness to consider different viewpoints and to enter into dialogue with friends and adversaries alike. They also suggested that the Consulate General expand its outreach efforts, especially to bring American students and scholars to India in numbers approaching those of Indians in the United States.

The Consulate General sent all the great ideas we received by telegram to Washington and also entered them on www.America.gov’s blog.

In Search of One’s Identity

In any society where people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds mix and marry, the notion of personal and cultural identity becomes more complex. American writer/documentary film-maker Sadia Shepard explores this complexity in her book, *The Girl from Foreign*, and in her film, *In Search of the Bene Israel*.

Ms. Shepard, left, meets students at Women’s Christian College.



Ms. Shepard grew up near Boston, daughter of a European-origin Christian father and a Pakistani-born Muslim mother. What she did not know until age 13 was that her beloved maternal grandmother was Jewish and born into the Bene Israel community of Mumbai, one of the smaller pieces of the vast Indian cultural mosaic.

On April 6 and 7, Ms. Shepard enthralled students, book lovers and film enthusiasts at the University of Madras, Women’s Christian College and other venues in Chennai with her tales of self-discovery and cultural preservation. Paradoxically, the stories of Ms. Shepard’s unique heritage and of the tiny Mumbai-area community that few of us had heard of have universal appeal. Is it because of curiosity about the disparate forces that shape our own identity?

Positive Images



Senior English Language Fellow Frances Westbrook oversees the work of English teachers at a teach-the-teachers workshop at Kilakarai Bukhari Aalim Arabic College, April 20–30.



After nearly a decade, the American Library reopens on Saturdays. Consul General Andrew Simkin cuts the cake at the Grand Opening on April 11.



Consul for Public Affairs Frederick Kaplan, Chairman of the Board of the American International School—Chennai, congratulates a graduating student on May 29.

Indian Themes in American Poetry

From the Transcendentalists through the Beats and beyond, India has sparked the imagination of American poets. On April 25 in the American Library, Vice Consuls Kris Fresonke and Kelly Kopcial, in celebration of National Poetry Month in the United States, discussed with a few dozen writers, teachers and students the influence India has had on American poetry over the centuries.

Ms. Fresonke noted that “Passage to India” by Walt Whitman (1819-1892) had been inspired by then recent engineering achievements, such as construction of the Suez Canal, that made the world smaller and India nearer to America.



Ms. Kopcial, left, and Ms. Fresonke, right, talk about how India influenced American poets. Photo: The Hindu

Whitman’s passage, however, is not so much a physical journey as it is a mystical one, India representing for him a spiritual fountainhead and a place for spiritual attainment. Whitman praises Vasco da Gama but describes a different kind of exploration: “For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go, And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.”

Whitman was a major influence on Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Ms. Kopcial said, and so was India. Ginsberg, along with a few of his Beat Generation friends, traveled around India and for a time in 1961-62 lived in Calcutta, returning briefly in 1971. He wrote extensively about his experiences in the country in letters and journals, later published. While Ginsberg lived the physical reality of India, mostly in impoverished surroundings, his quest, like Whitman’s, was spiritual.

Consular Corner:

Visas for Skilled Workers

Temporary skilled worker visas, also known as H-1B visas, are the lifeblood of immigration between South India and the United States. The Consulate General—Chennai interviewed over 38,000 H-1B visa applicants during the last fiscal year, almost a quarter of the worldwide total for this category.

Even in this era of economic downturn, the U.S. government has maintained the overall number of H-1B visas available. There is virtually no change in the program; there continue to be tens of thousands of H-1B visas available for foreign professionals to find lucrative, prestigious employment in America.

There is some confusion among the media and commentators regarding the U.S. companies that received economic stimulus funds. Some stories have claimed that there is a “ban” on H-1B visas for those companies that needed public funds. That is absolutely not true. In fact, such firms simply have to attest that they attempted to employ U.S. workers first before seeking a foreign applicant. Further, in the last fiscal year, this legislation would have affected just a tiny percentage of H-1B applicants – only about one percent of the congressionally-mandated cap. For the vast majority of prospective H-1B professionals, and all Indian companies, this legislation is a non-issue.

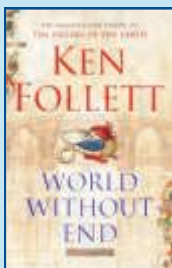
When looking for employment in the United States, remember that an H-1B professional has the same rights to fair treatment, similar wages and fringe benefits as does an American citizen employee. Recently, U.S. authorities brought criminal charges against an American company that used false documentation to pay reduced wages to its Indian H-1B employees. Since H-1B professionals can work only for their petitioning employer, these victims are put at serious financial risk. Increased enforcement, as well as informed applicants, reduces the chances of labor abuse and fraud in the skilled worker visa program. Get accurate information on U.S. visas at <http://chennai.usconsulate.gov>

What We Read

Mark I. Mishkin
Vice Consul

World Without End
by Ken Follett

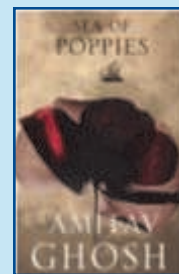
Almost two decades ago, author Ken Follett set new standards for historical fiction with his masterwork, *The Pillars of the Earth*. His 12th Century “history” of the building of Kingsbridge Cathedral over two generations captivated millions of readers worldwide. Now Follett is back with the sequel. Two hundred years later the descendants of the original cathedral builders live markedly different lives. Some seek lives of power and glory; others hope to help the community. Merthin and Ralph are the sons of a disgraced knight, Gerald. Merthin becomes a builder like his ancestors, while Ralph aims to restore the family’s honor through battle. Both are torn by the forces of love, lust, political intrigue and a mysterious plague.



Michelle Wildman Galstaun
Vice Consul

Sea of Poppies
by Amitav Ghosh

Jump aboard the *Ibis* as it leaves Calcutta in the midst of the run-up to the opium wars. Amitav Ghosh throws together seemingly unrelated characters that become “ship brothers born of the sea:” a widowed village woman, the son of an American slave (who is passing as white), the orphaned daughter of a French botanist (who is passing as a “coolie”) and an Anglophile raja (who has been wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius), as well as convicted criminals and indentured workers escaping poverty and starvation to work on the sugar cane plantations on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. The first in a trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* brings to life 1838 colonial India.



Disability and Prejudice

You might not know that Aileen Crowe Nandi, Principal Commercial Officer in the Consulate General, is deaf unless you happened to spot her changing the battery in a hearing aid. Today Ms. Nandi's "hearing impairment" is not much more of a factor in her life than is "vision impairment" for someone who needs spectacles. What is interesting, though, is Ms. Nandi's back story and what it tells us about our ever-evolving attitudes toward disability. This is what she had to say:

Tell us about your early experiences dealing with being differently abled.

I began my education at the Central Institute for the Deaf in St. Louis wearing a large box on my chest that allowed me to hear. When I switched to behind-the-ear hearing aids and learned to speak better, I was mainstreamed into a "regular" school. By and large, the other kids accepted me; it was the adults who had problems. One teacher, assuming that deafness was somehow linked to cognitive ability, initially placed me in the slow reading group even though in fact I was reading at a higher level than anyone else in the class.

How do you overcome those prejudices?

It is the person who holds the prejudices that has to overcome them. I try to help by proactively informing people about my deafness. This prevents misunderstanding when I don't see a person speaking to me and therefore don't respond. And it lets people know that there is no reason to hide a disability; it is nothing to be ashamed of.



Ms. Nandi with daughter Xochi and husband Rahul.

But, as a child, didn't it hurt when the teacher assumed you were "slow?"

My parents taught me that the way to confound prejudice is to rise above it and excel. Their encouragement instilled confidence in me at an early age. That is key not only for differently-abled children, but for all children. I follow my parents' example with my own daughter.

What should be done to ensure that people with disabilities get a fair shake in life?

All we really want is not to be excluded. In my case, there is virtually nothing that I cannot do that a hearing person can. Other people with physical disabilities can function perfectly well when reasonable accommodations are made — sometimes something as simple as a ramp. Also, people with developmental disorders or intellectual disabilities accomplish wonderful things when given a chance.

A Plaque Tells the Story

A large wooden plaque in the Consulate General provides a history of official U.S. representation in South India. The first of a long list of names of principal officers is that of Joseph L. Thompson, consular agent from 1867 to 1872. But long before Thompson, in 1794, the local American-born businessman William Abbott was appointed as the first U.S. consular agent in Madras. For the first century, the job was largely confined to providing assistance to U.S. merchant seamen who loaded their ships with Indian cloth, tea, spices and leather.

Only in 1908 did the United States establish a Consulate in Madras with Nathaniel B. Stewart as the first Consul. The offices



Consulate General—Chennai shortly after construction. St. George's Cathedral seen at left.

occupied the third floor of a building that belonged to Parrys & Co. at No.1 China Bazar Road. When the building was torn down and replaced by the Dare House in 1940, the Consulate rented the fourth floor of the new building.

On Indian independence in 1947, the Consulate was elevated to a Consulate General, and five years later moved to Mount Road where it shared a building with the Bank of America. By this time, U.S. relations with India had expanded greatly, and the United States needed a suitable purpose-built structure that could accommodate a diversity of activities such as library services, cultural programming, educational exchange, visas, American citizen services and development assistance, along with the ancient standby, trade promotion.

From the Church of South India, the United States leased out a parcel of land at Gemini Circle. The American architect hired to design the building traveled around South India in search of inspiration, and in the traditional houses of Thanjavur and Karaikudi he found what he wanted. The Consulate General thus was built around an open-air courtyard, the outside walls studded with chips of Pallavaram granite. On January 3, 1969, it was dedicated by Ambassador Chester Bowles.

In recent years, with the rapid increase in travel between India and the United States, providing consular services, especially the issuance of visas, has become the principal function of the Consulate General. Some 20,000 visitors enter the building every month to obtain a range of services, visit the American Library and attend cultural and educational programs. Messrs. Abbott, Thompson and Stewart certainly would be impressed.